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AUTHOR Smith, Francie
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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a systems-theory-based paradigm to argue that the characteristics of dysfunctional relationships found in families are also found in schools. To develop this thesis, the characteristics of systems theory as applied to a natural system such as the family are described. The family is defined as a primary intergenerational natural system in which the feelings, thoughts, and behavior of each member are influenced reciprocally by the feelings, thoughts, and behavior of other family members. It is suggested that the relationships and interpersonal processes forged in the family are replicated in the other relationships that family members establish later in life with spouses, peers, colleagues, authority figures, and subordinates. The emotional system, as defined by family systems theory, is presented as an information processing system which allows a person to both respond to and form relationships with itself, others, and its environment; this, in turn, influences and is influenced by the feeling system and the intellectual system. An application of family systems theory to understanding the relationship processes occurring in the school is described. A matrix using family systems theory is presented as a means of illustrating those relationships, and implications for schools are discussed. (TE)

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A Systems Paradigm

Francie Smith, 1990

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Introduction

The title, *From Dysfunctional Families to Dysfunctional Schools: A Systems Paradigm*, implies that there is a systematic connection between dysfunctional families and dysfunctional schools, institutions whose primary functions are to pass on the cultural norms of a society. An underlying concern with such a connection is the implication that the functionality of both families and schools affects the manner in which all children may become autonomous individuals. If this is true, then schools will not be successful until schools themselves recognize and change their institutionalized patterns of dysfunction. In accomplishing this end, the educational system must change the nature and quality of the relationships it not only espouses but actualizes. Specifically, our schools must change the nature of the interpersonal relationships they create and, in doing so, change education itself.

The family is the first emotional-social-intellectual context that the child encounters in life. However, the relationship patterns a child has learned in the family may not work in the emotional-social-intellectual environment of the school. In order for the school to work with the child in developing and cementing healthy intrapersonal competencies and relationship patterns, the people in the school must model these behaviors themselves. These ways of being and relating form the essence of the climate and culture of the school. Frequently, however, the establishment or development of healthy relationships is prevented as not all adults come to school with healthy relationship patterns themselves. Their ways of relating to others stem from what they too learned as children, indeed, what we all learned, about ourselves and how we should be with others both in and outside the family unit. In this way the school, often unintentionally and unknowingly, not only has replicated, but has also institutionalized the dysfunctional interpersonal relationship patterns and behaviors learned in the family. Therefore, if this pattern of replication is to change, schools must intentionally create healthy functional human and environmental relationship patterns, and, in doing so, schools, and the people in them, will change the structure of the system itself.

The thesis of this paper is that relationship characteristics found in families are found in the schools. To develop this thesis, the characteristics of systems theory as applied to a natural system

such as the family will be described. Second, the emotional system as defined by family systems theory will be presented. Third, an application of family systems theory to understanding the relationship processes occurring in the school will be presented. Fourth, a matrix, which utilizes family systems theory, will be presented as a means of illustrating those relationships. In conclusion, an implication regarding schools will be suggested.

Family Systems Theory

A system is a group of elements sharing a set of common characteristics within a relationship (Ackoff, 1974). Bowen (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) describes the human family as a natural system, that is, one imprinted with those processes which occur in nature, and, therefore, "All life is systems." For Bradshaw (1988), a family system results from the interaction of its parts in connecting relationships. Without this interaction, there is no system. When applied to the family system, this interaction, or relationship process, involves the entire family, nuclear and extended, and is multigenerational. Therefore, the functioning of any one member affects, and is affected by, the emotional functioning of any and all other family members.

The family is an emotional unit and the thoughts and behaviors of its members are understood within the context of that unit. A major implication of this reasoning is that the functioning of one member is influenced by, or a reflection of, the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of the other family members. This suggests that the functioning of any one member of a family system cannot be autonomous, that instead it is a reaction to, or a reflection of, the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of other family members (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In a family, each child , parent, and every other member of the extended family, has an effect on at least one other member of the system, and the family as a whole.

A second major implication is that the ways we relate to others within the nuclear family are used in developing other primary relationships. Therefore, when we marry and begin a new family, old relationship patterns and processes are replicated. Theoretically, we can also take these same ways of relating to others when we go to school and to work. There they influence the

development of peer, collegial, and subordinate-superordinate relationships. Conceivably, in a school , the relationships between each student, teacher, custodian, secretary, and administrator will be influenced by the relationship processes learned in the family emotional unit.

The family is the primary system in an extensive network of social systems, because it is here that the individual learns to be in relationship to other individuals and other systems. According to Carl Rogers (1974), the child attempts to gain love, approval, and esteem, from its parents and learns from their interaction which behaviors are valued and which are not. From these early interpersonal experiences, patterns of relating to oneself and to others are developed. From these relationships, the self is defined. From this time on, who a person is and how a person relates to others will be influenced by these experiences.

The Emotional System

Kerr and Bowen (1988) propose that the family is "a particular kind of natural system" called an "*emotional system*" or "*emotional field*". This emotional system is, in essence, an information processing system which allows a person to both respond to and form relationships with itself, others, and its environment. The emotional system, as a "life force", is fundamental in generating and controlling behavior (or action) within the context of living systems.

There are, in addition to the emotional system, two other systems which influence an individual's behavior: the feeling system and the intellectual system. The feeling system pertains to one's level of personal awareness when there is a emotional response (reaction) to a social or other environmental stimulus. Feelings include (but are not limited to) guilt, shame, disapproval, resentment, anger, anxiety, fear, jealousy, sympathy, empathy, love, and joy. Feelings are what people are cognitively aware of in responding to a stimulus. In comparison, the intellectual system allows an individual to think, to know, to understand, and to communicate complex ideas. However, "much of the time man's intellect operates in the service of the feeling and emotional process" (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

When the intellect is influenced by the emotional and feeling systems, the intellect is bound

by subjectivity and polarization results. Emotional and feeling responses can be automatic and very influential on behavior and attitude, values and beliefs. Emotional reactiveness can occur simultaneously in the emotional, feeling, and thinking systems. For instance, when a verbal message is accompanied with an incongruent facial expression, the receiver may step back (emotional response), experience confusion (feeling response), and deny the content of the message (subjective intellectualization response). These three systems naturally interact, each one stimulating the other two (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

The emotional system has the tendency to exhibit polarity, or movement back and forth between opposites along a continuum. This movement allows for balance between opposing emotional forces operating in the system, whether that system be intrapersonal or interpersonal. Along the lines of the old adage "opposites attract", these dynamic forces move individuals within the system toward and away from each other, creating closeness then distance, attraction then repulsion, in a continual "counterbalancing" dance. This dance creates the emotional field surrounding the family. Once the steps of the dance have been learned, the dance steps that a member of the family takes with them to other dances are the same, only the partners change. Further, just as there is consistency in dance schools, there is consistency in the types of relationship patterns learned in families. There is a reciprocity in response: you move back, I move forward; you raise your arm, I twirl; you bow, I curtsy. And, so it goes.

The concept of closeness and distance is used to describe each individual as that individual attempts to achieve or maintain balance in the relationship. Togetherness and individuality, enmeshment and differentiation, estrangement and intimacy, and dependence and independence frequently are used to describe the resulting emotional fields. These relationship dynamics affect both the behavior and the perceptions of individuals. When fundamental emotional reactions cause feelings of being trapped, crowded, or controlled, the individual perceives (or misperceives) too much closeness. Conversely, if an individual perceives (misperceives) too much distance, the fundamental emotional reaction includes feelings of isolation, rejection, or lack of appreciation or love. The feelings released by this fundamental emotional reaction may be seen in facial

expressions, body postures, and covert or overt behaviors. Outwardly and inwardly, an individual may experience erosion of confidence, difficulty in accomplishing simple tasks, or, on the opposite extreme, surges of energy, confidence, or desire. This interplay occurring between the individual and the relationship system is of utmost significance. Systems theory, while it acknowledges what is occurring within the individual, stresses the balance or harmony occurring in the individual's relationship system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). It is this balance of oneness with self and with others that is critical to systems thinking.

In shifting to achieve the desired balance in and between oneself and others, an individual's locus of control moves back and forth between the individual and the dynamic processes occurring in the relationship system. In response, the relationship system as a whole allows for greater anxiety in some relationships than others, thus allowing for reduced tension in the group as a whole. In response to system imbalance, individuals may develop physical, emotional, or social symptoms. These responses occur three levels: emotional, intellectual, and feeling. (That is, an emotional response may also be experienced on a feeling or intellectual level.) As this awareness is usually subjective, it typically results in greater imbalance in the system. For example, if a child notices that one parent seems unapproachable, it is likely that the child will concur that it was something she had done to bring about the parent's distance. If the child only responds emotionally, the greater the likelihood that her response to the situation may be overly reactionary and dysfunctional in nature. If the child asks the parent, "Why aren't you paying attention to me?", the assumption is that the problem belongs to the individuals in the relationship. According to systems theory, the locus of control belongs to the relationship process and not to the individuals in the relationship. In fact, what is at work are life forces which direct individuals to be independent (individuality) or connected (togetherness) (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

The togetherness force results in people being attracted to others enough to live in relatively stable groups. However, this desire for togetherness can produce not only unity but conflict as well. In conflict, people tend to focus on the dysfunctional responses to the conflict rather than to the relationship processes of individuality and togetherness. Family systems theory suggests that

the "interplay of individuality and togetherness is important in every relationship in which people have emotional significance to each other. Emotional significance means that a person is affected on an emotional, feeling and subjective level by what another person thinks, feels, and says, and does or by what is imagined another person thinks, feels, says, and does" (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 64).

The relationship process becomes increasingly complicated when one or more other individuals join the primary relationship, or dyad, forming one or more triangles. The primary emotional influence on the activity in a triangle is anxiety. As the anxiety increases, and a third person enters the relationship, the anxiety may be spread among the three interconnected relationships, thus reducing the overall level of anxiety. At times, the anxiety cannot be contained within a single triangle and so it flows into other triangles which are said to be *interlocked*. These interlocking triangles, can significantly reduce the anxiety in the primary triangle, and therefore, in the primary dyad. At other times, each member of the primary triangle will collect a support group, or advocates, for the person at their corner.

In order to detriangle at least one person in the triangle must achieve emotional neutrality, or emotionally detach from the other two. In order to accomplish that, this person must be able to see both sides of the relationship process and not be influenced by what "should be." Once this is accomplished, this person must then be able to communicate a nuetral position by expecting the two who are having a problem to deal with it. If one can focus on the emotional processes at work in the system, then the people involved in the processes can get beyond blaming, side-taking, guilt, anger, and other feelings and subjective attitudes. This is difficult as society often reinforces these more typical responses to human problems. In detriangling, actions have more impact than words, and not doing something frequently has as great an effect as doing something.

Before connecting family systems theory to relationships occurring in schools, the terms individuality and togetherness must be defined as they form the basis for using this theory to analyze the relationship processes occurring in the schools. According to Kerr and Bowen (1988), individuality is a "biologically rooted life force" which compels a person to be unique, to create its

own separate identity. It is this force which instills the desire to be autonomous and independent, with the ultimate goal of self-actualization. The degree to which individuality is developed in any one person is a result of learning. This learning includes, but is not limited to, the intellectual acquisition of knowledge. Learning also occurs on the emotional level as conditioning, i.e., we are conditioned to respond emotionally, in contrast to acquiring knowledge intellectually. Individuation develops differently in each of us dependent upon the degree of individuation in the members of our family, especially our parents. For some, this means they become so independent they have difficulty establishing relationships. For others, the opposite is true, as they are so dependent they have difficulty being an individual.

Togetherness, too, is a "biologically rooted life force." This force compels the individual to form connection with others, to be dependent, to be one among others. The ultimate goal is to be in relationship. This compels the individual to do as others do, feel as others feel, and think like others think, and to have the same expectations for others as one has for oneself. These responses are learned in the form of emotional conditioning and as intellectually acquired values and beliefs (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

> The level of stability, cohesiveness, and cooperation in a group is affected by the interplay in individuality and togetherness. The capacity of groups of people to be closely and cooperatively involved is influenced both by the capacity of individuals to follow their own directives and by the degree to which individuals are oriented by the directives of the group. ... Within a family *or other group*, people are participating in both processes simultaneously (Kerr & Bowen, p. 65).

Balance results when individuals give and receive an equal amount of energy form a relationship.

The question then is, are these characteristics found in the schools? If they are, what do they look like? And, what do we do once we know they are there? The school is a second primary social system, one whose responsibility is to prepare individuals to take their place as responsible members of our society. It is here that the young child bonds with others outside the family unit. It is here that friendships are first made outside the family unit. Adjectives such as "best" and "favorite" (as well as their opposites!) describe the intensely important relationships that develop in

school between students, between teachers, and between students and their teachers.

One premise of this paper is that the relationship patterns first learned in the family will determine with whom we make friends and how these friendships will evolve. In fact, according to family systems theory, the relationship patterns learned in the family will influence all significant relationships throughout one's life. Certainly the relationship between student and teacher is significant. Therefore, the student-teacher relationship will be based on the patterns that both the student and the teacher have imprinted in their individual emotional systems. Also significant, are the friendships both the students and the teachers make, or do not make, in school.

If these school-derived relationships are, indeed, the result of the family relationship processes, they should display the same characteristics and be driven by the same life forces as the family. First, in order for there to be a systems analysis, the interaction process must involve all members of the system, and it must be multigenerational. Second, the functioning of one member of the system must affect, and be affected by, the other members of the system. Third, the relationship patterns should reflect the relationship patterns learned in the nuclear families of its individual members. Fourth, an emotional system or emotional field should develop around the members of the system, influencing their feeling and intellectual systems. Fifth, the life force of the system should display polarity, as the members of the system attempt to achieve balance between togetherness and individuality. Sixth, in the resolution of conflict, the focus is usually on the members' responses to the conflict rather than on the relationship processes at work. Seventh, triangles should evolve as members of the system attempt to reduce anxiety and resolve conflict.

Application of the Theory

When family systems theory is applied to the schools the characteristics seen in the family are also seen there. To illustrate this, let us look at the smallest unit in the school, an elementary school classroom. First, *the interaction process must involve all members of the system, and it must be multigenerational*. The typical classroom consists of 20-25 children of both genders, a teacher, and sometimes an adult instructional aide. The children, while they are all approximately

the same age, their actual ages are spread along a continuum with an average range of one year. Typically the teacher and the aide are female. Beyond this immediate "family" there is another individual whose presence is felt regularly in the classroom: the principal. Typically this person is a male. Therefore, a multigenerational system exists in the schools.

Second, *the functioning of one member of the system must affect, and be affected by, the other members of the system.* Teachers frequently speak of the "personality" of a particular class. By this they mean how well the students in a class work with each other and with the teacher. Some classes are more "difficult" than others; others seem to "click," for both the teacher and the students. Teachers marvel at how the personality of a class changes dramatically when certain students are absent. Students, too, work better with some students and teachers than they do with others. Each member is in relationship with every other member, even if that relationship is indirect, that is, through another member.

Third, *the relationship patterns should reflect the relationship patterns learned in the nuclear families of its individual members.* These relationship patterns are affected by gender, age, and position. Children who are first borns tend to be perfectionists as they have learned that in order to get the love, approval, and esteem they want they must respond correctly. This tends to guarantee success in the classroom. Second borns tend to get attention in other ways as the role of being perfect is already taken; these children tend to act out. Teachers who were first borns tend to be perfect and expect perfectionism. While they are pleased with first borns and frustrated with second borns, they will tend to be more concerned with the second borns because they still want things to be perfect. (Other issues to be managed, such as closeness and distance, will be discussed later.)

Fourth, *an emotional system or emotional field should develop around the members of the system, influencing their feeling and intellectual systems.* The emotional field of a class typically takes form over the first few days of school. Teachers use this time to organize the formal relationship: classroom procedures are introduced, consequences and rewards for behavior are delineated, and the emotional climate the teacher wishes to establish is introduced. The students in

the class may accept, reject, or modify it to fit their relationship needs. Once that emotional field is formed, newcomers to the class will quickly gravitate to those students who are most like themselves. If they do not, they will tend to remain loners. Outside the class system, members of the class often display different relationship pattens relative to who else is in their immediate emotional field, thus changing the perceptions one member has of another member.

Fifth, *the life force of the system should display polarity, as the members of the system attempt to achieve balance between togetherness and individuality*. Polarity may result in inactivity (indirect resistance to influence), reactivity (direct resistance against influence), proactivity (positive action for influence), or interaction (shared action with influence). Each member in a class strives to be both a member of the class as well as a unique individual in the class. Each member of the class has a perception of self that is a reflection of that person's relationships with other students and the teacher. Sometimes, in order to achieve a balance in one set of relationships in a class, the individual's relationships in another set of relationships is out of balance. For instance, in order to maintain balance in peer relationships, the relationship with the teacher or the class as a whole will be imbalanced. Typically this imbalance is revealed when there is incongruence between verbal expressions and non-verbal expressions (behavior).

Sixth, *in the resolution of conflict, the focus is usually on the members' responses to the conflict rather than on the relationship processes at work*. In resolving conflict in the classroom, the response is to the behaviors of an individual. If family systems theory were applied to the classroom, the response to conflict would focus on the relationship processes of togetherness and individuality. For instance, if the teacher requires rigid conformity, the individuality needs of students may be generating the conflict. On the other hand, if a student is feeling rejection, togetherness needs may be the source of the conflict as expressed by the student's behavior.

Seventh, *triangles should evolve as members of the system attempt to reduce anxiety and resolve conflict*. Oftentimes a third party is brought in to resolve conflict. Sometimes, this third party does not know that this is their role. If there is not a third person to reduce the anxiety caused when togetherness and individuality needs are not in balance, the relationship will not last.

With children you see a constant forming and reforming of friendships as they attempt to reduce anxiety in their friendships. The technique of conflict resolution allows for the introduction of a neutral third party, a person who can see the processes of individuality and togetherness at work and not be influenced by what should or should not be occurring. Often, because the teacher is a part of the classroom system, classroom conflicts that involve classroom discipline frequently may not be resolved by the teacher unless neutrality is maintained.

The Matrix

The matrix presented takes a look at the dynamics possible when individuals from functional and dysfunctional families come together in schools. For the purposes of this paradigm, the term "school" refers to the system of relationship patterns established by the school staff. Therefore, a dysfunctional school is one where the individuality and togetherness needs of the staff are not in balance; a functional school is a school where these individual needs are being achieved and are in balance. This balance of individuality and togetherness in a school in essence is the school climate. When students attend a school where these needs are not in balance it will affect how they are able to function in that climate. Conversely, if students attend a school where these needs are in balance, it will also affect how they function while they are at school. Students from dysfunctional families will function differently in each emotional climate; the same is true of students from functional families.

When students from dysfunctional families enroll in a school which is dysfunctional in nature, that school will be authoritarian in nature. Togetherness will be enforced with rigid codes of conduct, uniform performance expectations, and a "one right way" attitude. There would be a clear hierarchy of power through control. Everyone would know who is "in charge around here." Because the students came from homes with similar systems, they would begin to act in predictable ways. In essence there would be a chaotic reactionary response pattern by everyone in the school. In that the response patterns are relatively chaotic, the system and the individuals within it are characterized by high levels of chronic anxiety, or anxiety that has occurred for a long time and is

expected to continue into the indefinite future. Further, there is little hope for change in such a system, therefore while it is reactionary it is also inactive.

SYSTEM ORIENTATION

	DYSFUNCTIONAL SCHOOLS	FUNCTIONAL SCHOOLS
DYSFUNCTIONAL STUDENTS	AUTHORITARIAN • REACTIVE • INACTIVE • CHRONIC ANXIETY • CHAOTIC	OPTIMIZING • DEVELOPMENTAL • REFORMATIVE • ENABLING • PREACTIVE
FUNCTIONAL STUDENTS	REGRESSIVE • REPRESSSIVE • INHIBITIVE • ACUTE ANXIETY • DEPRESSIVE	EMPOWERING • PARTICIPATIVE • INTEGRATIVE • INTERACTIVE • COOPERATIVE

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In contrast, if those same students were to enroll in a school which is basically functional in nature, the staff, having recognized and planned for their needs, would have a program in place to optimize the students. This program would be developmental in nature, providing opportunities for the students and the staff to better meet their individualization needs. Because it would provide for change, it would be reformative in nature. In that the program was designed to strengthen the individualzation needs of the students, it could be said that its intent was to enable them. Designed to actualize for their individual futures, it would be proactive.

Different kinds of behaviors result when functional students arrive at the school house doors. Should that school be dysfunctional in nature, the students will find a situation which is regressive for them. As they are learning to balance their individual/togetherness needs at home, the school attempts to enforce an authoritarian way of doing things, thus repressing the students.

This climate creates acute anxiety in the students, frequently effectively inhibiting their previously learned behaviors. Thus, enforced togetherness creates a depressive atmosphere of compliance.

Should these same functional students attend a functional school, both the school staff and the students are empowered. Active participation of every individual in the school is actualized. This participation may take the form of shared governance, as in participatory decision making, at the classroom or the school level. In that all members work together to design what their individual and joint futures will be, the planning is interactive. There is integration of individual and togetherness needs to achieve balance both for the individuals in the system, but also for the system. It is through this cooperation of the individuals involved in the system that each is empowered.

An Implication for Schools

There is one major implication for schools: By replicating the dysfunctional patterns learned in the family, we create dysfunctional systems. For this not to continue, the schools must both change themselves and provide opportunities for change. Before any of this takes place, however, there are several preconditions. First, in order for school people to change the nature of the relationships they establish at school, they need to become aware of the relationship processes they bring with themselves to the school. These processes were learned as children, practiced as adults, and replicated as adults in their own families. Awareness is sometimes very difficult to achieve. Denial of dysfunctional processes in oneself is as typical as is recognition in others. Therefore, school people need to become very, almost painfully, aware of their own processes. Second, they must be willing to change those that do not work for them. Third, they must actively begin the process of personal change. Fourth, this change must occur in an atmosphere of acceptance of self and for others.